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SUBJECT: BASRAH GOVERNOR REMAINS IF OFFICE, FOR NOW

REF: (A) 06 BASRAH 58 (B) BASRAH 25 (C) BASRAH 60

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CLASSIFIED BY: Louis L. Bono, Director, Basrah Regional Embassy Office, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION

¶1. (C) The latest attempt to oust Basrah Governor Mohammed al-Wa'eli appears to be over, at least for now. The three leading opponents, provincial council members Hassan al-Rashid (Badr) and Sayid Yousuf (Thar Allah) and Defense Ministry advisor Majid al-Sari, visited the Regional Embassy Office (REO) on Friday, May 4, and the Governor visited the following day. Both the Governor and the opposition leaders indicated their willingness to sit down together, and we understand one or more representatives from the GoI will help facilitate the talks. Despite varying reports of threats and intimidation, both sides exercised remarkable restraint during the process given their personal enmities toward each other. Nevertheless, we are not out of the woods yet, and we are encouraging both sides to find a peaceful solution. End summary.

THE CASE AGAINST THE GOVERNOR

¶2. (C) Al-Rashid said there were about 15 charges against the Governor. While he could not remember them all, he said the principle charges were failure to provide security and services, corruption, and misuse of public funds. He said for one year, the Governor did not attend provincial council meetings and frequently traveled abroad without providing an accounting for his trips. During our meeting the following day, Wa'eli dismissed the charges as senseless. He said Basrah provides "the best services in Iraq" for fuel and electricity, and said some of the others made no sense, such as his support for the MND-SE operation to disband the Basrah Police serious crimes unit and his continued engagement with MND-SE, even after the Prime Minister had ordered disengagement. (Note: The Prime Minister ordered disengagement from MND-SE after British forces raided the Basrah National Iraqi Intelligence Agency office on March 4. End note.) The Governor said he was also charged with supporting the detention by MND-SE of certain individuals, defaming religious figures, and his brother's belligerence towards the police chief.

THE GOVERNOR SURVIVES AGAIN, BUT BARELY

¶3. (C) Al-Sari organized the May 4 meeting as a last-ditch effort to enlist Coalition support for their waning cause. Al-Sari, al-Rashid, and Yousuf led an unsuccessful attempt last year to depose Wa'eli, and came very close in this latest

attempt. (See ref. A.) Al-Rashid, the well-regarded provincial council member and former governor, said 27 members exercised a vote of no confidence in the Governor and contended that this vote complied with the two-thirds majority requirement for the Governor's removal. When the REO director pointed out that two-thirds of 41 is 28 not 27, al-Rashid replied that the Governor and his deputy are non-voting members and thus do not count. The director noted that this may very well be a matter for the courts but opined that 27 votes will probably not suffice without such a ruling.

¶4. (C) Yousuf and al-Rashid said the Iranian Consul General offered to arrange a meeting between the parties, but they declined his offer. Al-Rashid told the Iranian that if anything went wrong, Fadhila would blame Iran. Both underscored the need for the situation to be resolved without outside interference and expressed appreciation for the Coalition's decision to refrain from involvement. Nonetheless, the less-polished Yousuf made a veiled attempt to enlist the REO's support. He and al-Rashid said that if Wa'eli stepped down, they would agree to replace him with another Fadhila candidate.

¶5. (C) During his visit, Wa'eli declared that the coup had failed, and he was back at work. He said Council of Representatives speaker Mahmoud Masheddani declared the vote of no confidence could not be used to remove Wa'eli from office. Wa'eli said his opponents were backed by Iran, which is seeking influence in Basrah's oil and gas resources. Wa'eli said the opposition was only able to muster 27 votes by threatening non-Basrah Islamic List (SCIRI, Badr, Thar Allah) provincial council members and their families. Wa'eli said Yousuf personally threatened the Council Chairman Mohammad al-Obadi, who reportedly fled Iraq after the vote.

¶6. (C) Wa'eli, robust in appearance and persona, acknowledged that the last few weeks had been difficult for him. The director noted that by remaining in Basrah against the advice of the British, Wa'eli had persevered through the crisis, a victor of sorts. However, given that this was not the first attempt to

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oust him, and would likely not be the last, the director asked if Wa'eli was considering resigning. Wa'eli said despite rumors to the contrary, he had no plans to resign, and that he has the full backing of the Fadhila party. He said even if the opposition agreed to replace him with a Fadhila member, there is no way to guarantee the Council would abide by the agreement. Wa'eli was scheduled to speak at the Iraq Reconstruction Conference in Amman on May 8 but told us he would not be attending.

PEACE FOR NOW

¶7. (C) In both meetings, the director highlighted the absence of violence and said the right to conduct peaceful protests is an important component of democratic government. He noted that Yousuf, the organizer of the protests, previously said if the Governor would not resign, he could be assassinated. (See ref B.) The director lauded Yousuf, not known for his congeniality, for exercising restraint and preventing violence from breaking out. He said Basrah needs serious leaders, and both he and al-Rashid had emerged from this crisis as leaders for their role in keeping the peace. The director told the Governor that this was a positive sign and urged the Governor to reconcile with his opponents. The director noted that the crisis began when he removed an OMS member from his position in the Power Administration and replaced him with a Fadhila member. The director said while the Governor has the authority to fill positions, he should consider an equitable distribution of public sector jobs.

¶8. (C) Both parties agreed to open a dialogue. Al-Rashid said he would sit down with the Governor as long as all political parties had equal representation and there were no red lines for the talks. He said the central government was going to send a representative to moderate the discussion, but noted that if the

talks fail, he could muster 29 votes against the Governor. The Governor confirmed that the Prime Minister was sending a delegation within the next two weeks to mediate between the parties, but said he would not sit at the table with anyone who "broke the law." The director urged both parties to negotiate in good faith and said the REO and Coalition were prepared to help facilitate talks if called upon.

COMMENT

¶ 9. (S) We are still not sure whether this game of chicken is over. Negotiation seems to be the exception, not the norm, to resolving political disputes in Basrah, and Yousuf and al-Rashid are sworn enemies of Wa'eli. At stake here is not just the governorship but control of the lucrative oil industry. Speculation continues that Fadhila fears losing its only political bastion and its share of oil profits, and it may yet urge Wa'eli to resign. This begs the question whether Wa'eli needs Fadhila more than Fadhila needs Wa'eli. Wa'eli's ego and reputation, not to mention his pocketbook, would suffer were he to walk away empty handed. Last year, Wa'eli told the REO that he was offered an appointment in a government ministry during the effort to unseat him, but he turned it down. (See ref. C.) If the Prime Minister really wants to remove him, it would probably take a high-profile position to pry him away. Meanwhile, if Wa'eli goes, Hassan al-Rashid seems to be the candidate of choice, despite his close ties to Iran.

BONO